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ABSTRACT

Outdoor education programs ranging from simple, near-school activities to lengthy wilderness camping experiences can benefit behavior disorderd students. Studies of outdoor education programs for these students have shown positive effects including improvements in self-concept, social adjustment, academic achievement, and group cohesion. Many types of programs now exist that use the out-of-doors in treating behavior disordered students. They include long-term residential camps, summer programs, day camps, and public school classes that integrate outdoor education into the curriculum areas or combine academic and high adventure programs. With skilled instruction, behavior disordered students can be successful at any number of challenging outdoor activities, e.g., rock climbing, backpacking, canoeing, orienteering, or cycling. Field trips that emphasize nature study or environmental education can also be effective outdoor learning experiences for behavior disordered students. The digest includes nine references and seven sources for further information (curriculum guides, program descriptions, etc.). (JHZ)

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OUTDOOR EDUCATION FOR BEHAVIOR DISORDERED STUDENTS

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OUTDOOR EDUCATION FOR BEHAVIOR DISORDERED STUDENTS

Outdoor education offers special benefits to behavior disordered students. Programs range from simple, near-school activities to lengthy, more expensive wilderness camping experiences. In either case, positive behavioral changes among behavior disordered students have been reported. A review of possible programs/activities and possible benefits is a step in the direction of offering new opportunities to these students.

What is outdoor education?

Outdoor education is a means of curriculum enrichment, whereby the process of learning takes place out of doors. Outdoor education broadly includes environmental education, conservation education, adventure education, school camping, wilderness therapy, and some aspects of outdoor recreation. Among the curricular areas often associated with outdoor education are language arts, social studies, mathematics, science, nature study, and music. Self-concept enhancement is approached through outdoor physical stress situations and opportunities for leadership development.

Outdoor education enables students and teachers to interact in an environment free from the limitations of the classroom. For behavior disordered students, the change in environment can facilitate learning by removing them from the classroom setting which they may already identify with failure.

What are the characteristics of behavior disordered students?

The federal government, in Public Law 94-142, defines a behavior disorder or serious emotional disturbance as follows:

"...a condition exhibiting one or more of the following characteristics over a long period of time and to a marked degree, which adversely affects educational performance:

A) An inability to learn which cannot be explained by intellectual, sensory, or health factors;

B) An inability to build or maintain satisfactory interpersonal relationships with peers and teachers;

C) Inappropriate types of behavior or feelings under normal circumstances;

D) A general pervasive mood of unhappiness or depression; or

E) A tendency to develop physical symptoms or fears associated with personal or school problems.

The term includes children who are schizophrenic or autistic. The term does not include children who are socially maladjusted, unless it is determined that they are seriously emotionally disturbed."

There are many different terms used to describe behavior disordered students. Those used most frequently in the literature include emotionally disturbed, disruptive, aggressive, emotionally handicapped or conduct disordered. Such students are frequently said to have "behavior problems."

Behaviors that characterize behavior disordered students and lead to referral for services include defiance, uncooperativeness, shyness, withdrawal, passiveness, self-consciousness, fearfulness, and anxiety, to name a few. The degree of severity and the duration of these and other behaviors may vary from student to student.

What effects can outdoor education have on behavior disordered students?

Research done on outdoor education programs for behavior disordered students yields a number of positive findings. Among these are improvement in self-concept, social adjustment, academic achievement, and group cohesion. Relationships with peers, parents, teachers, and counselors were also improved in some of the programs. Teachers also reported greater ability to teach specific skills and academic behaviors, and to lessen disruptive behavior when programs were conducted out of doors.

Reports from individual programs show promising results in the application of outdoor education principles in teaching behavior disordered youth. Lane et al. (1983) found increases in peer relationships and group cohesion in their counseling-oriented "Group Walk-Talk" program, which combined hiking and counseling in a public school program for adolescents.

Residential programs that use wilderness camping have also reported success. An evaluation of the Eckard Foundation (Griffen, 1981), a residential therapeutic camping program, revealed significant improvement in self-concept, personality adjustment, and academic skill level. Rigothi (1974) reported favorable student and teacher evaluation of student adjustment and academic achievement in a similiar program for secondary students with emotional and drug-related problems in New York State.

Non-residential programs also have reported success with behavior disordered students. Burdsal and Force (1983) examined counselor ratings of youth involved in three two-week wilderness expeditions. The results show that boys are perceived as becoming more self-reliant and as increasing in involvement with the therapeutic process. No significant changes were reported for girls. A study of a Dallas,

Texas, program specifically for girls (Neff, 1973), called Girl's Adventure Trails, revealed statistically significant changes in the student attitude scale and academic motivation measures. Girls who participated in the 26-day wilderness camping program, which featured individual and group counseling, attained a positive attitude towards themselves, parents, and teachers.

Hobbs and Radka (1975) studied behavior change during a short-term (five-day) therapeutic camping program. Operant techniques were used to modify verbal behaviors of adolescent boys during group therapy sessions. Besides having success with modifying verbal behaviors, the authors also reported that the group became more close-knit and generally worked together on camp problems.

Possible methodological shortcomings must be taken into consideration when evaluating the results of many outdoor education studies. Byers (1979) mentions that a common problem in many studies is the lack of a control group. To correct other problems with research Byers recommends documentation of the actual content of camping programs. Also, short-term outcomes in terms of changes in camper behavior must be assessed along with the relationship between the camp program and these changes. Finally, the long-term outcomes concerning community adjustment of the campers must be evaluated.

What types of programs and activities can be used with behavior disordered students?

Currently in existence are many types of programs that utilize the out-of-doors in treating behavior disordered children. Many are long-term residential camps that offer wilderness camping as therapy, while others are wilderness camping programs of shorter duration. The latter include summer programs, month-long programs, and day camps. Another type of program is the public school class that integrates outdoor education into the curriculum areas or combines the academic programs with high-adventure programming.

Behavior-disordered students benefit from activities that offer a challenge to the students. Camping, hiking, rock climbing, rappelling, canoeing, rafting, and backpacking are all activities that can be adapted to the novice and do not require exceptional physical ability. A patient and knowledgeable instructor can make these high-adventure activities success experiences for the behavior disordered student. Other activities that benefit students include ropes courses, initiative games, cross-country skiing, snowshoeing, orienteering, cycling, skin diving, tubing, and sailing.

Although not all schools can provide these activities, there are near-school activities which are also valuable. Field trips that emphasize nature study, environmental education, conservation of natural resources, awareness of the outside world, local history, community services, nutrition, physical education, and health education can also be learning experiences for behavior disordered students.

Where can more information concerning outdoor education for behavior disordered students be obtained?

Research articles, curriculum guides, program reports and project evaluations that assist in this area are readily available. Some sources of information are as follow:

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